

The Gas Chamber of Sherlock Holmes: And Other Writings on the Holocaust, Revisionism, and Historical Understanding

A Review

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by Samuel Crowell, Nine Banded Books, Charleston, W. Va., 2011. 401pp. Indexed.

Reading Samuel Crowell's, *The Gas Chamber of Sherlock Holmes* is a little like stumbling across the first perfectly sane inmate in an insane asylum years after being (wrongly) committed. Coming after prolonged inundation in clashing dogmas, the dispassionate use of evidence and logic to approach a sensible conclusion comes as a jolting but thoroughly pleasant novelty. And Crowell's modesty in stating that conclusion tentatively, knowing that genuinely rational inquiry will and should be superseded by later efforts, is an equally refreshing departure from polemical norms.

Drawing on establishment and revisionist authors, along with a careful scrutiny of German source documents, Crowell deftly evaluates contending claims arguing that Nazi "gas chambers" were (1) facilities for extermination (2) disinfection chambers (3) bomb shelters designed to protect against aerial gas attacks. Aligning eyewitness testimony with the material and documentary record, he sketches out the basis for a rational opinion, putting readers in a position to make their own judgments, without first requiring that they join in partisan warfare. Thanks to this effort we no longer need choose between delusional orthodoxy and strident dissidence, but can simply weigh evidence. This should come as a relief to everyone, while hopefully expanding the number of readers who can move beyond ritual denunciation and actually take the gas chamber debate seriously.

Crowell's work contains not a trace of anti-Semitism. He makes no attempt to whitewash Nazi racial policy, which he characterizes as a "shameful and disgraceful chapter in Germany's history," even if "we assumed revisionist theses to their maximum extent." The important consideration, he notes, is that "we would still be dealing with about a million dead European Jews, who died as a direct result of Nazi persecution, plunder, forced labor, deportation, and yes, mass killing." As for his personal beliefs, he says, "they remain what they have been for thirty years or more," that "there certainly was a Holocaust in the sense that Nazi Germany persecuted and massacred many Jews," with the likelihood "that this massacre ran into the millions." Philosemitic crusaders, please take note.

A self-declared "moderate revisionist" who clearly values the standards of rational investigation, Crowell avoids exaggeration, misrepresentation, and self-righteousness. He shows no reluctance to admit when a conclusion is debatable or when the evidence is open to varying interpretations; and he is able to perceive shortcomings in the views and tactics of those who share a revisionist stance - and even some merit in those who do not. This adds credibility to his analysis, and marks him as a rare breed of intellectual who actually does what he is supposed to do: face up to facts and plausibly explain them. It is truly sad that on such an important topic his open-mindedness is all but unique.

Alarmed by the banning of revisionist thought in Europe, Crowell originally took up Holocaust research in order to rescue intellectual freedom from the Holocaust witch hunts of the 1990s, ironically doing so under an assumed name (he fears for the safety of his family). He correctly points out that the censorship crusade against revisionism represents nothing other than "the censorship of historical investigation itself," and notes with considerable relief that it appears to be losing steam. After years of beatings, fire-bombings, heresy trials, and book shreadings, designed to suppress what is openly branded a species of historical blasphemy, one can only hope and pray that this judgment is correct.

Due to a lack of corroborating physical and documentary evidence, Crowell is skeptical of the mass homicidal gassing thesis, classifying it as a "conspiracy theory," which he defines as "a small group of people operating, as it were, invisibly, causing things to happen and covering the traces of their activity." He finds this an implausible line of thought, because "there is no material evidence to support the theory," i.e., no forensic evidence of homicidal gas chambers. Such an argument "demands the belief in unseen or invisible agency, which is able to accomplish its work without leaving behind clear material traces of its misdeeds." Crowell finds people who take such ideas seriously reminiscent of "those millennia of humans who attributed terrible events to demons, devils, or other invisible supernatural beings."

Crowell's analysis is particularly apt in critiquing the "convergence of evidence" model borrowed from evolutionary biology, in which multiple strands of facts allegedly "converge" on a conclusion. But as Crowell notes, "no competent historian works that way." For if historians have corroborating documentary evidence for a conclusion from a high-level document, they look for further substantiation from mid and low-level documents in order to avoid an argument with anomalous gaps in its support.. On the other hand, if they have merely eyewitness confirmation or a vague corroboratory reference, they search for higher level evidence before drawing hard and fast conclusions. The difference between this approach and conventional Holocaust historiography is striking. As Crowell notes: "The absence of evidence in a continuous hierarchy for gassing is a serious problem, just as an evolutionary biologist would be dumbfounded if he or she found entire geological strata in which there was no evidence of life at all. That is the proper analogy for the magnitude of the problem faced here."

Equally helpful is Crowell's explanation of the devastating impact of the Nuremberg Trials on subsequent Holocaust research. What scholars have been able to access about the Holocaust are a selection of documents from the German archives that were gathered and used for the express purpose of convicting the Nazi leadership in the first five years after World War II ended. Later the judgment of the International Military Court was declared unchallengeable, and criminal penalties were applied to those who publicly questioned the court's findings. This means that the same documents, along with a culpatory interpretation of those documents, have remained fixed for over sixty years. As Crowell notes: "This never happens in normal historiography."

The strength of Crowell's book is also its weakness. He stays riveted on "gas chambers," refusing to be drawn into broader issues or concerns. He explicitly rejects the notion that revisionist theses on the Holocaust carry with them implications for Israel, whose problems, he says "have nothing to do with an aggressive recounting of the suffering of the Jewish people in World War Two."

But this observation entirely misses the point. For the so-called "mother question" in the Middle East has never been how to solve Israel's problems, but rather, how to deal with the impossible problems created by Israel. And central to those problems is the political capital the Jewish state has made out of

what Crowell calls the Canonical Holocaust. Indeed, it is unlikely that a Jewish state could ever have been founded on Palestinian Arab lands, much less won license to commit permanent ethnic cleansing against them, had it not been for widespread belief in the extermination of European Jewry in gas chambers and cremation ovens, a uniquely horrible destiny, if true. But if that story is fatally flawed, as Crowell's careful research suggests it is, then world leaders' ritual deference to a presumed unique Jewish victimhood (especially on the part of U.S. leaders) may very well prove impossible to sustain, as may the justification for maintaining Israel as an exclusively Jewish state. And if U.S. support on these scores ever wavers, it is difficult to see how Israel will be able to stave off the radical transformation it will have to undergo in order to remain part of the Middle East. Whether it continues to exist in name or not, it would no longer be the theocracy the world is familiar with.

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